

# ASCENSION DAY

by

HAROLD RILEY



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## *The Ascension*

**T**HE Ascension of our Lord marks the climax of his earthly life, and the close of the great Forty Days in which his Resurrection appearances occurred. By the Ascension our Saviour left this world to return to the heaven from which he came, and entered on the glory of his Session at the right hand of the Father. From the throne of glory he was, ten days later, to send the promised gift of the Spirit to the Church at Pentecost.

The only full account of the Ascension in the New Testament is to be found in the Acts of the Apostles. St. Matthew's Gospel ends with a final commission of our Lord to his Apostles, but does not record the Ascension. St. Mark's Gospel either originally ended with the eighth verse of chapter xvi, or else was cut short at this point through the mutilation of the copy on which all subsequent manuscripts depend. The ordinary ending in our New Testaments has been added to round off the account, and is a very early record, even though it is not part of the original Gospel. It states, in a very few words, the fact of the Ascension: "So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God" (St. Mark xvi. 19). St. John has no narrative of the Ascension, having a distinctive structure of its own.

We have to turn then to St. Luke, in the Gospel and in the Acts, for our information. St. Luke has distinctive literary methods, and, following them, all that he does at the end of the Gospel is to give a formal dismissal of his characters from the scene by the briefest account of the Ascension (St. Luke xxiv. 50-53). Our Lord, he tells us, led his disciples out of the city, and then lifted up his hands and blessed them; while he did so "he was parted from them," and ascended into heaven. So the disciples



worshipped him, and returned with joy to Jerusalem.

Having given this formal account in the Gospel, St. Luke gives us further information in the Acts of the Apostles (i. 4-12). Here he tells us how after Christ had given commandments to his Apostles, and instructed them, he made his promise of power through the outpouring of the Holy Ghost. Then he was parted from them, rising from the earth until a cloud hid him from their sight. The Apostles stood gazing up into the sky, until they were aware of two Angels in white standing beside them, who addressed them, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven."

So the Apostles returned to Jerusalem, from Olivet, which was the place of this final appearance of the Christ.

### *The Meaning of the Ascension*

What is the meaning of this strange event? Obviously not that our Lord had risen a certain distance, until he reached a local heaven directly above a flat earth. The early Church realised that our Lord was "in the heavenlies," outside the conditions of time and space, and that "the right hand of the Father" was a symbolic way of describing that he was in the place of highest honour. What happened on Ascension Day was itself symbolic; it was intended to show to the Apostles that they were no longer to expect to see their Lord in further appearances on earth; and to reveal to them that Christ had entered into his glory. In no other way could they have understood that the time for such appearances was over. The narrative of the Ascension is not due to outmoded views of the character of the world, or of a local heaven; it is an example of how God makes his revelations known to men according to their psychological necessities.

There is further truth involved in the facts of our



Lord's Ascension. Had our Lord finally withdrawn his bodily presence in any other way, the Church might well have supposed that he who had taken on our human nature in his Incarnation had now laid it aside so that while he was alive in his divine nature, he had ceased to be Man. As it was, the Church realised that in the Ascension he who was Son of God and Son of Mary had gone into heaven in his human nature, and is true God and true Man for ever in his Father's glory.

### *The Feast of the Ascension*

The adoption by the Christian Church of the feasts of the Passover and of Pentecost, with their new Christian significance, made it certain that in due course there would be an annual celebration of the Lord's Ascension. At first indeed the Ascension was included in the Easter celebration, but when in A.D. 385 the lady Etheria went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, she found a celebration of the Presentation in the Temple forty days after the feast of our Lord's Birth, and a feast forty days after Easter. It does not appear that it was regarded as a feast of the Ascension, but it could not for long be kept from acquiring this significance. From Jerusalem the feast was extended to the Church in other places, until it became established universally.

### *The Mass of the Ascension*

We turn next to the Mass of Ascension Day. In the *Introit*, or opening chant, the Psalm-verse is from Psalm 47, "O clap your hands together, all ye people," chosen as the Psalm which speaks of God "going up with a merry noise," and the antiphon before and after the Psalm-verse and Gloria is taken from the account of the Ascension in the Acts of the Apostles, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven?"

The *Collect* reminds us of our belief that our



Lord has "ascended into the heavens," and teaches us to pray that we may also in heart and mind thither ascend. Our life "is hid with Christ in God," and our true home is where our Lord is. Our thoughts and desires are to be with him, for by his Ascension he has not gone a long distance from us, but being withdrawn from our bodily sight he is still with us always, "even unto the end of the world" (St. Matt. xviii. 20).

Instead of an Epistle from one of the letters of the Apostles, we have to-day a *Lesson* from the Acts of the Apostles (i. 1-11). Like the Gospel of St. Luke, the "former treatise" to which the opening words refer, the Acts is addressed to Theophilus, who in the Gospel is called "most excellent," and was perhaps therefore a person in high office under the Roman government. St. Luke first summarizes here the contents of the Gospel ("all that Jesus began to do and teach," etc.) and then goes on to the narrative of what happened on Ascension Day. He tells us how in response to the question of the disciples "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom?" Jesus told them that it was not for them to know the answer to such questions, but that they should receive power through the coming of the Holy Spirit. They were to witness to him, first in Jerusalem, then nearby in Judæa, and after that further afield in Samaria, and finally to "the uttermost parts of the world." After this, he was taken up into heaven, and entered into glory.

After the Epistle, since the feast occurs in Easter-tide, is sung an anthem consisting of *Alleluia* intertwined with two Psalm-verses. The first of these is, like the Introit, from Psalm 47: "God is gone up with a merry noise," a fitting song on the lips of Christians on the day when Jesus Christ, who is true God, went into heaven; the second is from Psalm 68: "The Lord is in the holy place of Sinai; ascending up on high, he hath led captivity captive."



These are the words on which St. Paul comments in the Epistle to the Ephesians (iv. 8-12), seeing in the orders of the Church, Apostles, evangelists, pastors and teachers, gifts of the risen Lord who, as the Psalm says, "gave gifts to men."

The *Gospel* consists of the last few verses of the ending to St. Mark's Gospel (xvi. 14-20), added, as we have seen to the possibly mutilated original text. In it we have a record of an appearance of our Lord to the eleven "as they sat at meat," and a commission to them to "preach the Gospel to every creature." Those who accept the Gospel will receive salvation, those who reject it do so to their condemnation. The Apostles are promised the divine protection, and assistance in their works of mercy. So finally the Ascension is recorded, and the resultant preaching of the Apostles "everywhere" in after days.

The *Offertory-sentence* repeats once more the words of Psalm 47, as the *Communion-anthem* is from Psalm 68. The two Psalms recur as themes of the feast.

In the *proper Preface* before the Sanctus, we are reminded not only of our Lord's own Ascension, but also of his own promise "to prepare a place for us." We who are members of Christ should look forward to being with him, to "reign with him in glory." Already while we are still on earth, we join "with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven," to sing praises of God; hereafter we hope to be among those who sing them "where he is."

During Eastertide, a special candle, called the *Paschal Candle*, has been standing at the north side of the Altar; it has been there to remind us of the risen Body of Christ, who is the Light of the world, present on earth during this season. On Ascension Day it is lighted for the Mass for the last time, and is extinguished at the end of the Gospel.



*The Joy of the Ascension*

The Ascension of our Lord represents his triumph as King, and his enthronement in heaven. We might on a slight consideration think that it would have been an occasion of sorrow to the Apostles, as they realised that they would not see their Lord again in this world. In fact they "returned to Jerusalem with great joy," for he himself had told them that it was expedient for them that he should go away. His departure was a necessary preliminary to the outpouring of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost, and of his own abiding in the Church. He is no longer seen, as of old, in the streets of Judæa or the lanes of Galilee, but he is present more intimately in the hearts of Christian people all over the world. As the Magdalene had to learn on Easter Day (St. John xx. 17) not to cling to his bodily presence, since he was now to ascend to his heavenly Father, so we come to realize that the entry of our Saviour into heaven is the condition of our close union with him. We have therefore every reason to rejoice, looking forward to that heavenly kingdom "whither our Saviour Christ hath gone before."

In the Apostles' joy there was an element of deep hope, for they were waiting for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit "not many days hence." For the next nine days they were in expectation, until on Whitsunday their hopes were fulfilled, and they were "endued with power from on high." The Christian who rejoices at the thought of his Lord's triumph in heaven also does so with a deep and abiding hope, knowing that he who ascended gives gifts to men, and that the greatest of these gifts is the power of the Holy Spirit. It is because of this that Catholic custom has set aside the nine days between the Ascension and Pentecost as a special "Novena" for prayer, so that when we come to the feast of the Holy Spirit it may be with hearts open to receive his blessings and graces.